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ABSTRACT

One of four research projects designed to examine barriers to the entrance of women into nontraditional careers, the study summarized here examined the attitudes held by 638 New Jersey high school students, teachers, and other professionals at comprehensive and vocational-technical high schools toward sexual harassment. Study participants were asked if they considered 10 different behaviors to be sexual harassment. Female respondents were more likely to consider the behaviors to be sexual harassment than were male respondents. Age was related to the perception of sexual harassment for all behaviors except for touching and gestures: respondents aged 16-18 were consistently less likely to perceive behaviors as sexual harassment than were individuals aged 13-15 or over 18. Caucasian respondents were more likely to perceive noises, work assignments, threats to job security, conditional pay, and work hours as sexual harassment. Jokes were found to be particularly offensive to Hispanic respondents, and Asian respondents were less likely to view noises as sexual harassment. Students enrolled in traditional career preparation programs were significantly more likely to be sensitive to sexual harassment than those enrolled in nontraditional programs. Females indicated they would be much more likely to report sexual harassment in settings with a clear policy regarding sexual harassment. (Contains 13 references.) (MN)

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BARRIERS TO WOMEN ENTERING THE WORKFORCE: SEXUAL HARASSMENT

RESEARCH BULLETIN NO. 2

Life Skills Center
Montclair State College

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NEW JERSEY EQUITY RESEARCH BULLETIN

Fall, 1992 *Life Skills Center, Montclair State* *Research Bulletin No. 2*

Barriers to Women Entering the Workforce: Sexual Harrassment

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During the 1991-92 academic year the Life Skills Center at Montclair State conducted four research projects to examine barriers to the entrance of women into nontraditional careers. A career is considered to be nontraditional if it is engaged in by seventy-five percent or more of the opposite gender. The research was sponsored by the New Jersey Division of Adult and Occupational Education through funding from the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act, P.L. 101-392. The following four barriers were studied: sexual harassment, math anxiety, student knowledge about and attitudes toward nontraditional careers, and student and educator attitudes toward women in nontraditional roles.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to gain insight into secondary students' perceptions of sexual harassment in the anticipation that the findings will be helpful to those who are interested in nontraditional career choices and to business and industry in establishing and understanding workers' attitudes about sexual harassment. A wide range of definitions are found in the literature explaining what constitutes sexual harassment. In general, sexual harassment can be considered any inappropriate personal attention (Welzenbach, 1986) which distresses the individual or interferes with activities. Some researchers have defined sexual harassment in terms of power and control (McKinney, 1990).

Students' fear of the potential for sexual harassment in nontraditional work situations has been considered to be a deterrent to women interested in pursuing careers which are not usually occupied by women. Interest in sexual harassment as an issue has been heightened following the Thomas-Hill Supreme Court hearings. It has become apparent following the intense discussion in the media and popular literature that there is no societal agreement as to what specifically constitutes sexual harassment.

The incidence of sexual harassment is difficult to assess because victims are reluctant to report the incident in a formal manner. Peterson and Massengill (1982) report incidence of unwanted sexual attention at work to be as high as 90 percent. Research on sexual harassment among college students varied from 20 percent (Dzeich and Weiner, 1984) to as high as 40 percent (Riger, 1991).

Younger women are more likely to be harassed than older women but are less likely to report harassment (Fain and Anderson, 1987; LaFontaine and Trudeau, 1986; Lott, et al, 1982; Riger, 1991; and Robinson and Reid, 1985). Most victims of sexual harassment are between the ages of 24 and 34, and are in entry level positions. The harasser is generally male, older than the victim, and likely to be the supervisor or a superior of the victim (Peterson and Massengill, 1982).

Perception of what constitutes sexual harassment has been found to vary between males and females. Females generally have more negative attitudes, are less tolerant, see it as a more serious problem, and have broader definitions of sexual harassment than do males (McKinney, 1990; Mazer and Percival, 1989). Women are more likely than men to consider teasing, looks, gestures, unnecessary physical contact, and unwelcome remarks to be sexual harassment (Johnson, Stockdale, and Sall, 1991). Body language which is perceived to be sexual in nature is considered significantly more offensive by women than by men (McKinney, 1990). Most males and females consider explicit sexual propositions, physical advances, and sexual bribery to be sexual harassment (Dunwoody-Miller and Gutek, 1985; Wishnietsky, 1991).

Method

The study was conducted using a survey method during the 1991-92 academic year. Participants in the study were 638 students, teachers, and other professionals in comprehensive and vocational technical high schools. Participants were asked to indicate if they considered ten different behaviors to be sexual harassment. In addition, the groups were asked to indicate their interest in a sexual harassment workshop, if they knew what to do if sexually harassed, whether they would report sexual

harassment, and whether sexual harassment happened only to women. Data was collected in group situations in high schools throughout the state which had received funding for gender equity training projects by the New Jersey Division of Adult and Occupational Education. The data collection instrument was administered by gender equity project directors in each participating school.

Demographic Profile of Participants

- Age:
  range - 13 to 20+ years
  median - 18 years

- The sample consisted of:
  34% males
  66% females

- The career preparation programs in which the students were enrolled:
  67% traditional
  33% nontraditional

- Race and ethnic composition of the sample:
  58% Caucasian
  21% African American
  7% Hispanic
  4% Asian
  3% Native American
  5% Other

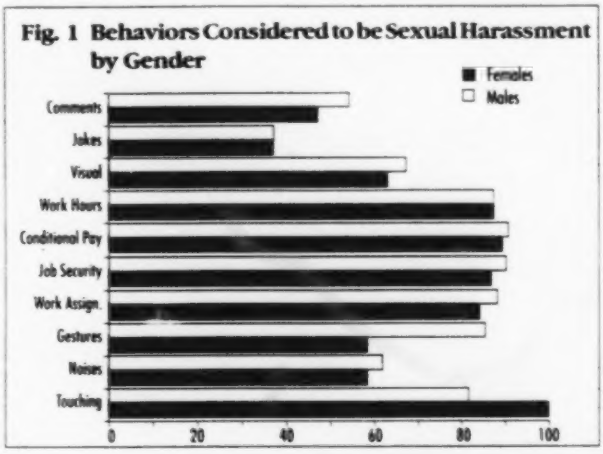
- Family income ranged from less than $20,000 to over $90,000 per year with 49% of the sample reporting family incomes of over $40,000 per year.

- The educational level of the participants ranged from high school students to those with college degrees. Fifty-two percent of the sample were either comprehensive high school or vocational technical school students.

Results of Study

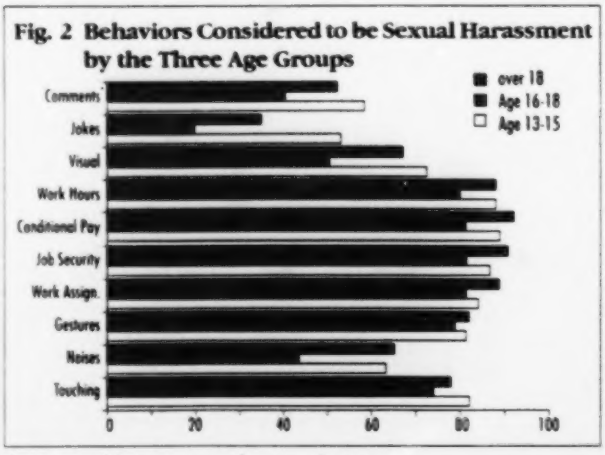
Interest in Sexual Harassment: Female respondents were found to be interested in having a sexual harassment workshop in their school; knew that their school had a sexual harassment policy; knew what to do if sexually harassed; would report personal sexual harassment; and stated that sexual harassment does not happen only to females.

Fig. 1 Behaviors Considered to be Sexual Harassment by Gender



Perception of Sexual Harassment: The respondents were asked to indicate if they considered each of ten different behaviors to be sexual harassment. See Fig. 1 for the percentage of respondents who stated that each of the behaviors constituted sexual harassment. The behaviors most likely to be considered to be sexual harassment were conditional pay and threat to job security.

Fig. 2 Behaviors Considered to be Sexual Harassment by the Three Age Groups



- **Female respondents were more likely to consider the behaviors to be sexual harassment than were male respondents.** Females were more likely to perceive the described behaviors as sexual harassment in all cases except jokes and work hours. For these questions a similar percentage of males and females considered the behavior to be sexual harassment. For both males and females the most offensive types of sexual harassment were those in which job security, compensation, or work assignments were conditioned on sexual favors. For these types of harassment both males and females were in agreement that this behavior was sexual harassment. See Fig. 1.

- **Age was related to perception of sexual harassment** for all behaviors except touching and gestures. Most differences among the age groups were related to feelings about visually offensive materials, jokes of a sexual nature, and comments about one's physical attributes. Students in the 13-15 year old group were more likely to consider visual stimuli, jokes, and comments about one's physical attributes to be sexual harassment. The 16-18 year old group were consistently less likely to perceive behaviors as sexual harassment than the other age groups. See Fig. 2.

- **Race was found to be significantly related to perception of sexual harassing behaviors.** Significant differences were found between the groups in their perception of noises, work assignments, job security, conditional pay, work hours, and jokes. Caucasian respondents were more likely to indicate that noises, work assignments, threat to job security, conditional pay, and work hours were sexual harassment than were

other groups. Jokes were particularly offensive to those of Hispanic origin. Respondents of Asian background were less likely to consider noises to be sexual harassment. See Fig. 3.

• **Students who were enrolled in traditional career preparation programs were significantly more likely to be sensitive to sexual harassment than those enrolled in nontraditional programs.** For all behaviors tested students in traditional programs were somewhat more likely to consider the behavior to be sexual harassment. For behaviors which included noises, gestures, work assignments, threat to job security, conditional pay, work hours, and visually offensive materials, students in traditional career preparation programs were significantly more likely to consider the behavior to be sexually offensive than those in nontraditional career preparation programs. See Fig. 4.

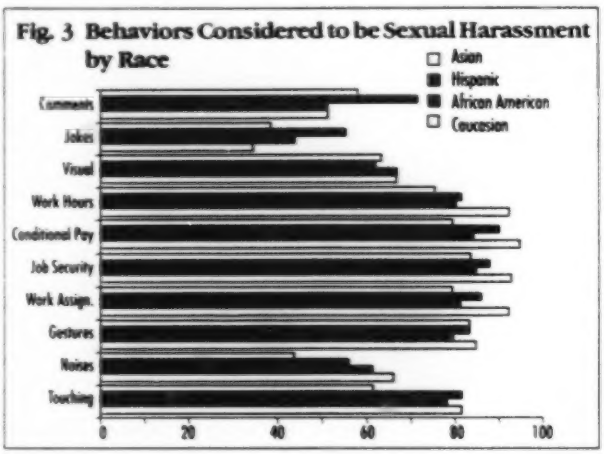


Fig. 3 Behaviors Considered to be Sexual Harassment by Race

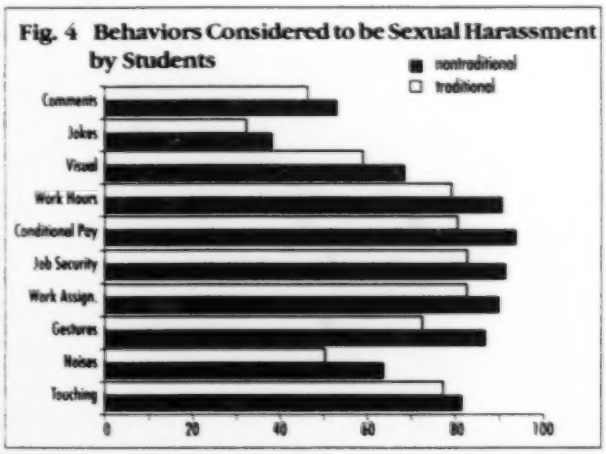


Fig. 4 Behaviors Considered to be Sexual Harassment by Students

Conclusions

Sexual harassment is a problem for schools, business, and industry. The threat of harassment prevents women from fully participating in educational situations and from freely pursuing career options. The extent of sexual harassment is difficult to ascertain because of the differences in the perception of harassment for males and females and because of the reluctance of victims to report cases of sexual harassment. **Educational institutions, business, and industry must develop a working climate which is free of sexual harassment in order for all to participate to the full extent of their ability and interests.**

Verbal and auditory forms of harassment were more likely to be considered to be harassment by females than by males. Females were generally more sensitive to sexual harassment than males on all of the selected conditions of harassment with the exception of comments about a person's physical attributes. The findings of the study as related to gender, support the general findings summarized in the review of literature that females are more sensitive to sexual harassment, and that they find a wider variety of behaviors offensive than do males (McKinney, 1990).

In addition to being more sensitive to behaviors which could be considered sexual harassment, females were found to be significantly more interested in workshops about sexual harassment. Research has shown that females are more likely to report sexual harassment in situations in which there is a clear policy about sexual harassment and a procedure for resolving the problem. Some researchers have indicated an interest on the part of females to learn empowering strategies which can help them in coping with sexual harassment (Howard, 1991; Peterson and Massengill, 1982).

Age was found to be significantly related to perception of sexual harassment. Surveys about the prevalence of sexual harassment have indicated that it occurs most frequently with younger women but that older women are more likely to report it. Women may develop confidence in their ability to cope with sexual harassment as they mature. As they develop more security in their job and achieve higher levels of self esteem, they are more willing to seek redress for harassment (Lott, et al, 1982; Reilly, et al, 1986).

Students who were enrolled in traditional career preparation programs were significantly more sensitive to sexual harassment than those in nontraditional career preparation programs. Workers who are minorities, are young, and are not in positions of power are the most likely to be harassed (Peterson and Massengill, 1982). Perhaps students enrolled in nontraditional programs accept the prospect of sexual harassment as a part of their career choice or they feel that they are able to handle harassment if it occurs.

Race was examined as related to perception of sexual harassment. The

racial groups who were most likely to classify the behaviors as sexual harassment were Caucasians and Hispanics. Caucasian males and females were among the most sensitive groups to sexual harassment. Among Hispanic and Asian groups, however, sensitivity to sexual harassment was much higher for females than for males.

Recommendations

The study of sexual harassment is important in order to identify behaviors which individuals find to be offensive so that policies and strategies to guide action in the workplace may be developed. Sexual harassment can be alleviated by helping males and females to understand the types of behaviors which are found to be objectionable; by developing procedures for the satisfactory solution of problems so that work places are productive both for the actualization of the individual and the success of the business or industry; and by increasing understanding of the individuals at greatest risk for engaging in, condoning, or experiencing sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment is a deterrent to the success of both men and women in school and in the workplace. Strategies to prevent or eliminate these harassing behaviors need to be developed. Barriers to women can be overcome through institutional commitment to programs such as the equity student leadership program, Achieving Sex Equity Through Students. ASETS demonstrates to students that equity can be brought about through laws, education, and awareness.

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Participating School Districts

Bayonne Public Schools, Essex County Vocational Technical School, Gloucester County Vocational Technical School, Irvington Public Schools, Mercer County Vocational Technical School, Middlesex County Vocational Technical School, Monmouth County Vocational Technical School, Paramus Public Schools, Pinelands Regional School District, and Salem County Vocational Technical School.

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